

Questioning to Hesitation, Rather Than Hesitating to Question:  
*A Pragmatic Hermeneutic Perspective On Educational Inquiry.*

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**Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers. – Voltaire.**

*Understanding opposing viewpoints* is not only intuitively meritorious, it is the philosophical holy grail of a vast number of widely accepted theoretical frameworks. It is also the foundational goal of virtually any educational endeavor. With regard to the specific educational enterprise entitled *Philosophy for Children* (or indeed any program like it), understanding opposing viewpoints is the practical assumption of its primary pedagogical anchor: *The Community of Inquiry*. The point of this paper, therefore, is **not** to convince you of the merits of such an edict. It is, rather, to go deeper, and to try to ferret out exactly what *kind* of intersubjective understanding is necessary in order to have the meritorious outcome that so many advocates suggest will result, and what kind of process needs to be undertaken in order to reach such an understanding. What precisely does it mean, in other words, to *connect* across a divide, as opposed to merely hearing another's words? What do I need to do in order to maximally facilitate such connection? How will I know when I have achieved this kind of intersubjective understanding? What pictures do teachers need to paint in order to guide their students toward making such connections?

We will begin our journey toward answers to these questions by first briefly outlining some of the advantages that are purported to result from connecting across divides. From there, we will follow arguments imbedded in both the pragmatist and hermeneutic traditions that lead to the conclusion that connecting across a divide requires a penetrating and sustained *questioning process* that finds relief only when the justificatory background material of the other *nibbles at the certainty* of one's own position (hence the title: Questioning to Hesitation). Finally, we will explore the implications of this conclusion, namely (a) that it suggests what kind of questioning is the

right kind of questioning, (b) that it suggests a *redefinition* of what counts as “respect for persons” and (c) that it challenges the common assumption that the efficacy of communal inquiry is self-fulfilling and self-regulating, and suggests, by contrast, that facilitators ought to be far more prepared to engage in *questioning to hesitation*.

### **The merits of understanding opposing points of view.**

Taking science as a model, Charles Sanders Peirce argues that seriously dealing with opposing viewpoints is a necessary condition of moving toward truth. Habermas concurs with this claim, though he worries that Peirce over-focuses on the end state, namely *agreement*, when what is really critical in intersubjective interaction is rather the “*process* of justification in the course of which true propositions must meet all objections.” Habermas, in other words, is trying to warn us that, though intersubjectivity is a necessary condition of moving toward truth, nonetheless we need to keep in mind that “a proposition is **(or at least ought to be)** agreed to because it is true; it is not true because it could be the content of a consensus reached under ideal conditions.”<sup>1</sup>

David Kennedy, in his book *The Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education*, argues that the prime meritorious outcome of connecting across divides is the transformation of the self from one that is rigid, and presumably highly defended, to one that is quite literally a “self-in-progress.” In order to become what he refers to an “intersubject,” Kennedy says that we must be comfortable with the fact that change is the norm, and that there is “no developmental terminus beyond a continuously receding horizon of ultimate integration.”<sup>2</sup>

In my own book, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*, I argue that genuinely considering the merits of opposing viewpoints is necessary in order to become an autonomous individual. This is so because your biases are not your own; they have been introjected from “prevailing norms, the views of influential individuals, and pervasive media scripts.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, “because the determining influence of others is most prevalent within one’s own mind, the only way to ensure that one has in fact neutralized the internal determining influence of others” . . . is “to test those perspectives against the viewpoint of actual others.” In other words, “It is only by continuously submitting our knowledge claims to the public test of a community of inquirers that we can strive toward impartiality and ultimately our own freedom.”<sup>4</sup>

**Truth, self-transformation and autonomy** (not to mention more obvious candidates such as decreased violence and increased affection) are thus just some of the potential consequences of connecting across divides. The question is, then, why is this not more pervasive? Given all the talking that is going on, why is there so little connection through genuine understanding?

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<sup>1</sup> Habermas. *Between Naturalism and Religion*. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Gardner. *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Gardner. *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*. 42.

This question ought to alert us to the seriousness of the task that calls to us, and that is that we need to get a clearer picture of *precisely* what is involved in understanding another so that we can gift to ourselves, and those whom we cherish, the real possibility of enhancing interhuman understanding.

### **What are the necessary conditions of understanding another?**

According to Peirce, genuinely reflecting on the merits of opposing viewpoints requires that one begin with a genuine sense of *doubt about one's own position*. Specifically, he says that it is only the irritation of doubt that causes the struggle to attain a state of belief—a struggle that he calls “inquiry.”<sup>5</sup> And elsewhere he reiterates that the action of thought is only excited by the irritation of doubt, which ceases when belief is attained<sup>6</sup>.

John Dewey makes a similar point in his book *How We Think* when he says that a necessary precondition of reflective thought is a state of perplexity, hesitation, or doubt;<sup>7</sup> that thinking only begins in what may fairly be called a *forked-road* situation. This is so because “as long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, . . . there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to **pause**.”<sup>8</sup> And Dewey goes on to say that “General appeals to a child (or to a grown-up) *to think* irrespective of the existence in his own experience of some difficulty that troubles him and disturbs his equilibrium, are as futile as advice to lift himself by his boot-straps.”<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, Gadamer, in his book *Truth and Method*, argues that in order to engage in “authentic” dialogue “one must want to know and that means *knowing that one does not know*.”<sup>10</sup> Gadamer describes this attitude of “knowing that one does not know” as “the famous Socratic *docta ignorantis* which, amid the most extreme negativity of doubt, opens up the way to the true superiority of questioning.”<sup>11</sup>

And Kennedy, in making the case that an intersubject must be fluid, argues that interlocutors who enter genuine dialogue enter “a space in which the assumptions of *both* are put under interrogation, and in which therefore the outcome is uncertain and emergent.”<sup>12</sup>

**Doubt, a sense of fallibilism, a deep understanding that what one thinks one knows may always be brought into question** would thus seem to be a necessary condition of

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<sup>5</sup> Peirce. “The Fixation of Belief.” 10.

<sup>6</sup> Peirce. “The Fixation of Belief.” 26.

<sup>7</sup> Dewey. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey. 9. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey. 10

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer. 357.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer. 356.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy. 165.

ever understanding another. But how is this sort of doubt possible in any real, or genuine, sense?

As Peirce himself has pointed out, in order for this doubt to do its work, it cannot be a kind of faked Cartesian doubt; it must be, rather, “real and living doubt,” because, “without this, all discussion is idle”<sup>13</sup>, and “mental action on the subject comes to an end; and if it did go on, it would be without purpose.”<sup>14</sup>

And Peirce exacerbates our problem by pointing out that human beings naturally abhor doubt and try to avoid it wherever possible. Specifically, Peirce says:

“Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else. On the contrary, we cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe.”<sup>15</sup>

Gadamer also recognizes the difficulty of adopting the Socratic *docta ignorantis*. He argues that a genuine sense of fallibilism has difficulty surviving in a sea of “received opinion.” Specifically, he says: “it is the power of opinion against which it is so hard to obtain an admission of ignorance. It is opinion that suppresses questions. Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be the general opinion. . .”<sup>16</sup>

And Kennedy, too, bemoans the fact that “institutions and individuals resist change,” which he believes is largely due to the fear of darkness and chaos.<sup>17</sup> He says that most of us are like “Marcuse’s ‘one dimensional man’ in whom the possibilities of the intersubject have fallen victim to ‘the social controls of technological reality, which extend liberty while intensifying domination’.”<sup>18</sup>

These philosophical musings that, combined, buttress the claim that humans *naturally* abhor doubt, is, interestingly, supported by modern neuroscience. Thus, in his book entitled *On Being Certain: On Believing That You Are Right Even When You Are Not*, Robert Burton (Associate Chief of the Department of Neurosciences at Mt. Zion hospital at the University of California, San Francisco), outlines in detail studies that show that the *feeling of certainty* has an addictive power similar to that of cocaine, both of which are a product of the activation of the limbic system, the brain’s primary reward system.<sup>19</sup> It is on the basis of this finding that Burton worries that educational practice, in its ignorance of this neuroscientific fact, may actually be exacerbating this addiction to the

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<sup>13</sup> Peirce. “The Fixation of Belief.” 11.

<sup>14</sup> Peirce. “The Fixation of Belief.” 11.

<sup>15</sup> Peirce. “The Fixation of Belief.” 11.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer. 359.

<sup>17</sup> Kennedy. 184-5.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy. 185.

<sup>19</sup> Burton. 24.

feeling of “certainty without deliberation or even conscious awareness of having a thought.”<sup>20</sup> Thus he says:

I cannot help wondering if an educational system that promotes black or white and yes or no answers might be affecting how reward systems develop in our youth. If the fundamental thrust of education is “being correct” rather than acquiring a thoughtful awareness of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and underlying paradoxes, it is easy to see how the brain reward systems might be molded to prefer certainty over open-mindedness. To the extent that doubt is less emphasized, there will be far more risk in asking tough questions. Conversely, we, like rats rewarded for pressing the bar, will stick with the tried-and-true responses.<sup>21</sup>

In his discussion of what he terms the “pathology of certainty,”<sup>22</sup> Burton references psychologist Leon Festinger whose work on “cognitive dissonance” shows that the more committed we are to a belief, the harder it is to relinquish, even in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence. As an example, Festinger cites a group of committed cult members who, when confronted with a flood that they predicted but that did not happen, reinterpreted the evidence to show that they were right all along, but that the earth was not destroyed because of their faithfulness.<sup>23</sup> Anthropologist Robin Horton found similar “closed” ways of thinking in the Azande, a tribe in North Central Africa. Horton describes this sort of thinking as “lacking awareness of alternatives, a sacredness of beliefs, and anxiety about threats to them.”<sup>24</sup>

Whether one goes along with Horton and characterizes this “closed” way of thinking as “anxiety over threat to sacred beliefs,” or, alternatively, with Pierce as “abhorrence of doubt,” or with Gadamer as “conformity to accepted opinion,” or with Burton as “addiction to certainty,” or with Festinger as “aversion to cognitive dissonance,” these multi-disciplinary converging accounts of the human preference for “the indisputable” drive us inexorably into the following conundrum. Doubt is necessary for understanding, but because it is irritating and frightening, we abjure doubt—a tendency that is cemented by the comfort of our long cherished beliefs that are themselves frequently reinforced by dominating social and educational forces.

And though Peirce suggests that one method to shake the confidence in our own beliefs is by discovering that others think differently<sup>25</sup>, this cannot help us. Indeed, it just lands us in a vicious circle: we need to see the merits of opposing viewpoints in order to create doubt about our own positions, but we need to first doubt our own positions in order to genuinely reflect on the merits of opposing viewpoints. How do we break into this circle?

### **What is the pathway to doubt?**

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<sup>20</sup> Burton. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Burton. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Burton. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Burton. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Horton. 154-155.

<sup>25</sup> Peirce. “The Fixation of Belief.” 12.

A potential answer to this question can be found in what I will refer to as a “**pragmatic hermeneutic**” principle since it finds life from a combination of Peirce and Gadamer.

Gadamer, on the one hand, (representing the hermeneutic tradition) argues that thinking is all about the question. But he also argues, importantly, that there is a right way and a wrong way to question. He argues that the art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further<sup>26</sup>. He says: “a person who wants to understand must question what lies behind what is said. . . . If we go back behind what is said, then we inevitably ask questions beyond what is said”<sup>27</sup>—we move into the horizon of the other. “This is the reason why understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning.”<sup>28</sup>

And, on the other hand, Peirce, (representing the pragmatist tradition) says that “most frequently doubts arise from some indecision, however momentary, in our action”<sup>29</sup>—some “**hesitancy**,” such that, when doubt has been resolved, “we find ourselves decided as to how we should act under such circumstances as those which occasioned our hesitation.”

If we take these two suggestions together that, on the one hand, understanding requires that we question until we move into the horizon of the other and, on the other, that we will know when we have reached doubt when a sense of **hesitancy** begins to emerge, we come to the suggestion that genuinely understanding the viewpoint of another requires that we keep asking questions until such time that we get that “ah-ah moment”—that moment which makes us wonder, even if only momentarily, whether or not our opposition’s viewpoint might indeed be more valid than our own—a sense **hesitancy**, in other words, that perhaps our own beliefs are not the best guide to action after all.

This suggestion that we ought to *question to hesitation* adds another layer to Habermas’ notion of communicative action that he outlines in his book bearing that name. Habermas argues that you cannot judge the adequacy of an agent’s reasoned support of her assertions and/or actions unless you first understand the larger context<sup>30</sup> from which assertions and/or actions make sense to that agent, i.e., seem rational. What is being suggested here is that, if one does that seriously, i.e., if one probes until the reasoned support of another’s action appears rational, then a moment of hesitancy will inevitably emerge because a contradiction with one’s own point of view will have been created.<sup>31</sup> Sincerely believing that one understands another’s point of view, in other words, is not good enough; or, reiterating Gadamer, “understanding is always more than merely re-

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer. 360.

<sup>27</sup> Gadamer. 363.

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer. 368.

<sup>29</sup> Peirce. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” 27.

<sup>30</sup> Habermas. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Habermas says something very close to what is being said here when he says “Objectively, I can hear noises, but once I genuinely understand, then what is said is something that can be true of false. I am then challenged to react with a “yes” or “no.” It becomes a comment on our common world.” Habermas. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. 112.

creating someone else's meaning."<sup>32</sup> What one's needs to do, rather, is that, aside from being keenly focused on what the other is saying, *one also needs to supply the right kind of questions so that the rationality of what the other is saying is born.* We need to watch for the "ah-ah" moment: *if no sense of hesitancy emerges, then one cannot claim to have understood the other.*

### **What are the implications of *questioning to hesitation*?**

If we take the above as true, if we believe that genuine understanding requires that we persist in questioning others into the background that supports their assertions until a moment of hesitancy emerges, then a number of implications follow.

The most obvious perhaps is that it gives direction to what counts as *the right kind of questioning*. In a 1996 paper entitled "Inquiry is No Mere Conversation: It is Hard Work," I argued that in order to get a more accurate take on what someone says one must be prepared to ask a "second why."<sup>33</sup> Here I am suggesting a "**why explosion**," because "why" is the only shovel that can get you to hesitation; one ought not to stop until one has found the mother lode.

The notion of *questioning to hesitation* also paints a new hue onto the notion of "respect for persons." In our liberal, capitalist, individualistic postmodern world, we tend to assume that respect for persons requires that we leave one another alone. With regard to communicative style, this notion morphs into the edict that we ought to be reticent about questioning others about how they see the world because such an intrusion tramples on their personal space. The argument presented here, interestingly, suggests quite the opposite. That is, a **pragmatic hermeneutic** reinterpretation of Kant's notion of treating others as "ends" demands of us not simply to respect their choices, but rather that we invest the time and "the energy of presence" to follow a line of penetrating questions until we get to the "ah-ah"; it demands of us that we attempt to invade, rather than avoid, the *lebenswelt* of the other.

The fact that genuine understanding requires that one *question to hesitation*, as well, has interesting implications for any enterprise that utilizes group discussion and/or interchange with the intent that it be genuinely *educational*. On the one hand, it suggests that, since a facilitator can't possibly facilitate a discussion unless she understands the points that are made by contributors, s/he must be prepared, *contrary to the "facilitator-reticence" more commonly advocated*, to question contributions until s/he herself experiences some hesitancy. As well, the fact that genuine understanding requires that one *question to hesitation* also suggests that aside from just modeling, facilitators might do better to explicitly explain to participants in what genuine understanding consists, and in so doing, encourage them to question one another to the ah-ah moment, as well as welcome the probing questions of others.

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<sup>32</sup> Gadamer. 368.

<sup>33</sup>Gardner. "Inquiry is No Mere Conversation: It is Hard Work."

Before closing, it is important to note that, though *questioning to hesitation* ought to be the guiding ideal, nonetheless there may be times when we come up empty. As Dewey points out, many beliefs are “picked up—we know not how. From obscure sources and by unnoticed channels they insinuate themselves into acceptance and become unconsciously a part of our mental furniture.”<sup>34</sup> Such beliefs lack the scaffolding of reasons, and therefore questioning may ignite little more than defensive maneuvering to hide the deficit. As well, obstacles can arise if another is particularly sensitive about welcoming strangers into her life-world. This is problematic since, as Martin Buber emphasizes in his book, *I and Thou*, I can only meet another in “the in between” *if the other comes out to meet me*.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Habermas emphasizes that success in communicative action is always a function of both the speaker *and the hearer*.<sup>36</sup> Such reticence, however, does not imply that I ought to refrain from attempting to “question-travel” into your world until you have given me a fully authorized passport. After all, those with whom we “talk” have often been cynicized by past experience with empty rhetoric that is littered with humiliating traps. If, instead, it becomes evident that the intent in questioning is to bracket the questioner rather than the one questioned, there is a good chance that its aura will heal in the exchange. That is, if we keep in mind Gadamer’s edict that a true “Dialectic consists **not** in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength,”<sup>37</sup> our very intent will go a long way to soften defenses.

## Summary

In summary then, aside from the obvious social benefit of “getting along,” being able to genuinely understand the viewpoints of others enhances the possibility of truth, self-expansion, and autonomy. Such meritorious benefits, however, are not easily purchased and, indeed, *drift further from our grasp under the pressure of a superficial understanding of what “understanding” is all about*. Given our natural tendency to cherish our old beliefs as we do old friends, we must be on the alert that we do not mistake fake dialogue and fake inquiry for that which is real. And in educational enterprises in general, and in *Philosophy for Children* in particular, we must be diligent not to accept superficial measures such as, for instance, “inclusiveness, opportunity to contribute, lack of deception and coercion”<sup>38</sup>, etc., as sufficient indication that remedial dialogue is transpiring. Nor even should we accept the ability to paraphrase precisely what the other has said.

And we must heed Gadamer’s warning that “though to someone who engages in dialogue only to prove himself right and not to gain insight, asking questions will indeed seem easier than answering them,” quite the opposite is true. This is so because the art of “right questioning” requires that a state of indeterminacy be brought about so that an

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<sup>34</sup> Dewey. 6

<sup>35</sup> Buber. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Habermas. *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, 361. Emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Habermas. *Between Naturalism and Religion*. 49-50.



equilibrium emerges between the pro and contra.<sup>39</sup> The art of questioning, is the art of questioning ever further,<sup>40</sup> until what the other says makes genuine sense.

This willingness to *question to hesitation* is the engine that keeps the mind open. It is for that reason, and for all the benefits that accrue from the emergence of genuine intersubjective understanding, that we, as individuals, ought to embrace this approach. Even more importantly, however, it is as educators, and as educators of educators, that it is critical (in order to evade the pernicious “soma” of fake discussion) that we arm those who facilitate educational interchange with a sufficiently clear message, i.e., one that they can share with those whom they engage in dialogue, that genuine inquiry can only grow out of the agar of real doubt, but that real doubt can emerge only on the other side of the sort of questioning that lays bare the rationality of opposing viewpoints. This is the **pragmatic hermeneutic** principle that drives inquiry toward genuine interpersonal understanding. It is a principle that demands that we give permission to, indeed that we *encourage*, all participants of any community of inquiry (including facilitators) to engage in *questioning to hesitation*.

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer. 355

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer. 360

